



Main Street Congregational Church

145 Main Street, Amesbury MA 01913

January 12, 2025 - What Shall We Do

(Luke 3:1-22)

Steve Horhota has been laboriously and lovingly tending to our Main Street Church archives. Many times he has come down the stairs from the archives room with a treasure to show me. Most recently it was a file folder of Harland Main's jokes. Another talked about a choice to pay the pastor with a cord of wood and other curious things the details of which escape me when I am trying to recall them to share but there have been some wonderful discoveries and sharing. Talk to Steve, he can fill you in. In his work Steve discovered the the last written history pulled together for the church ended in 1981 and he has spent time adding on to that with a working draft history taking us up to 2023. He has been soliciting readers to review and offer ideas for things that might have been missed. The deadline for that was Friday but I have a hunch he would make space for people that want to raise their hands to take a look.

Steve asked me to review it several weeks ago and I have dutifully written that down on my to do list and carried a copy around. This week I started to read it - in part because there is nothing like a deadline to spur one to action but also because I have been thinking a lot about what it means to be church and how it is that church is called and needed to be in the world at this particular moment in time. I was wondering how those who have passed the spirit and legacy of this church to us were church in their day.as I have been pondering the question repeated three times in the gospel reading - what shall we do?

I dug into that first section of Main Street Church history which covers 1828-1965. I loved thinking about people gathering on this plot of land and coming together as a church. I am honored to know that we have been entrusted with the faith and community which they began but I have to confess the documented history for that time left me feeling empty. I learned a lot about church finances. The different clergy and their compensation. The cost of organ repair and the selling of pews. All that was part of what kept Main Street Church being Main Street Church but spirit, community, mission? What did they do? Why were they church? There were a few things that I noted - On December 6, 1841 the church took a position against slavery finding that it was a violation against principles and spirit of the Christian religion; in 1850 they purchased 2 gas lamps for the pulpit (after Christmas Eve services in the dark I can relate to this); and on November 13, 1872 sisters were afforded the same rights and privileges as brothers.

Other than those 3 things I felt that the history I read could have been the history of any organization. The label was pastor but they could have been talking about the next branch manager of the mill, or the repair of the carriage or the maintenance of a private home. I didn't hear language or sentiment about the spirit and ministry of being church. Not that they didn't have it, they likely did, but I was longing to hear about and have it shared with me. I wanted to hear about the power of resurrecting love, the new life enabled by the spirit, the kind of community that is shaped by Jesus' values. I wanted to hear about how a group of people shaped their lives, in community, to live the way Jesus taught and modeled. Examples of that kind of living inspire me and give me courage to try and live that way also. Stories of those kinds of communities remind me of what they offer to the world and make me want to be part of that way also.

I found that energy and inspiration in the words from Luke this morning. So much of that story speaks to the reality of our now. Luke's gospel has jumped from the nativity stories to the adult Jesus. Luke's gospel has moved from John and Jesus in the womb to John and Jesus in the wilderness. Luke's gospel has a lot to say about how people live in the world that is around them. This story begins with a listing of those who are in power and they are not Jimmy Carter kinds of leaders. It continues with the rag tag variety of people who give their allegiance to the God of John and the ways of community and seek to live those out. It talks about people who know the violence and oppression of empire and in that trust and lean on the sustaining love and ways of God present and with agency in what is.

There they are in the beauty and challenge of wilderness and John is telling it like it is. No velvet easy words but straight out - God will do what God has promised, restoration will come - every valley shall be lifted, every mountain made low. God's on it but we are part of that becoming. We prepare the way. John continues. He admonishes them - brood of vipers - and invites them into a God based way of living. The broken is not the end. The empire is not the end.

This is the story I need to hear now and here it is. God's got this and God invites us to live into God's way. And we likely find ourselves asking, as those followers did in the wilderness, what shall we do? John gives specific to do lists to the particular people in that time - about sharing, not extorting, being fair. John declares that God's ways reshape and define how we live in the world.

John predated the existence of church but his teaching, declaration and invitation fit in with what I understand church to be now. People who gather around the love of God in the reality of injustice and oppression. People who remember and trust the prophecy of restoration and leveling even when it feels very distant. People from different walks of life joining in community and allowing the spirit to shape and inspire. People who have inherited a faith, property and name from folk who gathered around that same story in 1828 and planted the seeds of Main Street Church.

I wanted to hear that part of spirit and love to the documented history but its not printed. What is printed are the logistics and practicalities of being church. Those matter also. We gather in a building. Someone has paid the electric bill and we have lights. We have the gift of music. Someone has search for a Music Minister. We pay our staff. Many someones pledge financial

support. We have Thrift Shop. Many someones sort through bags and staff retail hours. We keep track of finances - and Kay Weiner has done that for us for way more than 10 years and even as she has had to step back from the weekly accounting she continues to be our corporate memory. The logistics and practicalities are many and needed and can feel overwhelming at times. Maybe that's why the history speaks about those so much. They matter. There aren't enough words to to cover the gratitude for what so many do to have us be church. Maybe you will come and share your ideas and wisdom and faith at our Annual Meeting on February 2. We have inherited a legacy and now we do our part. We make casseroles. We knit prayer shawls. We coach sports teams. We smile at the stranger. We listen. We pray. We clean up beaches. We walk with wonder in nature. We check in on neighbors. In our day to day and gathered in community, we practice kindness and justice and are part of the leveling and the restoring. It goes slowly, much more slowly than this preacher wants. We don't control the timing. We do make choices about how we life, love and trust together as the Main Street Church. Amen.

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